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SUBJECT: HELMAND VIEWS ON U.S. TROOP LEVELS IN AFGHANISTAN

Classified By: Charge D'Affairs Joseph A. Mussomeli for reasons 1.4 (b)  
and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Over a three-week period in October, PRT Helmand obtained a wide range of Afghans views (more than 75 in all) on the issue of U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan. A majority thought that, under any scenario, the country's security problems will not be solved soon, with many referencing a decades-long timeframe. While the opinions below reflect the perspectives of only one province, they collectively represent a cross-section of Helmandi public opinion that Washington readers may find of interest. END SUMMARY.

HELMAND GOVERNOR AND DEPUTY  
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¶2. (C) In detailed discussions with PRT reps over a three-week period in October, a wide range of Afghans (numbering more than 75 in total) mostly from southern Afghanistan offered views about U.S. troop levels. State Representative to the Second Marine Expeditionary Brigade (2MEB) spoke to Helmand's governor, deputy governor, several day laborers, displaced Now Zad residents, approximately three dozen Afghan Army officers, non-commissioned officers and enlisted soldiers stationed adjacent to Camp Leatherneck. Farah's governor also commented on the subject, as did shopkeepers and elders in the city of Delaram (the part of Nimruz Province within the 2MEB Area of Operation (AO)).

¶3. (C) Governor Mangal told State, UK FCO, and PRT reps, and 2d MEB Commanding General, BGen Lawrence Nicholson, in mid-October that U.S. troops would be needed in Helmand and Afghanistan for some time. He said it was important also for Helmand residents to see more of their own ANSF on the streets, adding sarcastically, "Of course, 40,000 more U.S. troops will solve terrorism in Afghanistan!" NOTE: Governor Mangal has been a strong proponent of U.S. Marine operations in Helmand, recently telling CENTCOM Commander Petraeus that successes in Nawa and Garmsir Districts would also be possible in Marjah, an operation on hold pending approval of more U.S. troop and associated ANSF commitments. He said Helmandis were asking him "When can Marjah become like Nawa?"  
END NOTE Helmand's Deputy Governor Sattar stressed the urgency of Afghans seeing less corruption among officials, in addition to a stronger ANSF. In a lengthy discussion over tea at the governor's residence, he said that the coalition needed to focus its primary efforts on ANSF training. He likened simply adding thousands of more troops as continuing a "project" that so far had not worked.

FARAH GOVERNOR (AND HIS GUARDS)  
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¶4. (C) Farah's Governor Amin told State Rep, PRT officer, and 2d MEB CG that more troops could help improve security in outlying areas. He urged the continued presence of Marine

units in one of the most remote region of his province (Bakwa), and said he did not know the population there (which is minimal), claiming that the area served as a Taliban transit route. Governor Amin voiced blunt criticism of the central government and its lackluster efforts to beat back corruption; some parts of the government, he said pointedly, "supported the Taliban" (he did not specify further).

15. (U) Two of Governor Amin's guards (natives of Kunduz and Kunar Provinces) offered contrasting views while seated under ripe pomegranate trees. One said his family and friends did not want more U.S. troops to arrive because of the increased number of IEDs targeting them, which inevitably left civilians hurt. The other said, "I am sure more troops will come, but it is more important to win support from the people and to build our army." Both said Americans needed to talk more publicly about strengthening the Afghan army in particular. The Kunar native said that the arrival of U.S. troops there had led to more fighting in his home province, not less. Each considered the level of troop commitment to be less important than the duration of the coalition presence; the guard (an ex-ANA soldier) from Kunduz said he "could not imagine" how long a U.S.-Afghanistan security partnership was needed, but estimated "more than 30 years" was necessary.

#### DAY LABORERS

16. (U) A group of day laborers based at Camp Leatherneck told the State Rep that more troops might help in the short-term; however, over the long term, the situation could become a

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trap. One worker (a Kabul native) said that Afghans also needed to hear from the U.S. that "eventually, you Americans will leave -- not only that you will stay and help the government and army become stronger." He said a majority of his poor family members and neighbors in the capital did not see the U.S. military as occupiers per se, but that more and more were feeling uneasy about our intentions and the unwanted but unavoidable effects of a larger foreign military presence. The laborer said that unemployed, uneducated Afghan youth ("some are my friends") were especially susceptible to anti-coalition rhetoric.

#### DISPLACED NOW ZAD RESIDENTS

17. (U) About a dozen displaced residents from Now Zad currently living in Kwaja Jamal (KJ) on the outskirts of the abandoned city described being caught in the middle of U.S. Marines and still active Taliban elements in the area. One elder referred to a Pashtun declaring "today, we are caught between a tiger and a lion -- your side and the Taliban on the other side." Two children gathered nearby said that they only felt safe when they saw ANA around their mud compounds.

18. (U) One teenager loudly argued that more U.S. troops would create "more war" and that many in the area would rather be left alone. NOTE: A Marine company is stationed in Now Zad, which remains abandoned because of its IED and mine-infested streets; the day before the foot patrol, a Marine was killed by an IED (double amputation) and several others were wounded. As 2d MEB CG, USAID Rep, and State Rep walked to the KJ area, a group of locals gathering fire wood nearby detonated two more IEDs, killing one and wounding seven. Now Zad's district governor has agreed to be based full-time in the area once he is formally approved in that position by Kabul officials; work on renovating the downtown bazaar is also set to begin. END NOTE.

#### DELARAM SHOPKEEPERS

19. (U) While drinking green tea outside several shops in

downtown Delaram (situated along a busy transit corridor in Nimruz Province), eight shopkeepers offered their views about U.S. troop levels. The oldest asked, "What benefit have we seen so far? Will more troops bring more of the same?" He added that funds being spent on U.S. troops should instead be directed toward the ANA. Another argued that "even one million more troops" would not be enough to solve Afghanistan's problems. Their most immediate concerns centered on access to a local mosque (near a joint ANSF-Marine base) and electricity projects. Several said Marines had helped improve security in the immediate area, but that Taliban retained free movement farther away.

#### AFGHAN ARMY OFFICERS AND SOLDIERS

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¶10. (U) In a two-hour exchange at an ANA base located adjacent to Camp Leatherneck, approximately three dozen Afghan army officers and soldiers (NCOs and enlisted among them) commented on possible increases in U.S. troop levels. Most had spent years fighting in Helmand and southern Afghanistan, many alongside coalition forces. In one notable exchange, the unit's most senior member (a grizzled 36-year veteran of the ANA and native of mountainous eastern Afghanistan) offered the following assessment (comments verbatim):

"I have served 36 years in the army. Wars always destroy nations. Our war in Afghanistan continues to be brought to us by other countries, especially those near to us."

"The whole world knows that the U.S. is a superpower. But most people want you to send assets to Afghanistan that bring peace, not more assets that bring war. More war equipment is what the enemy wants here, the enemies of the U.S. people and the Afghan people."

"Afghanistan's ground yells for water projects, wheat fields; it is not yelling for more war equipment. Afghans do not want more Americans killed and wounded on our land. War equipment does not talk to us."

NOTE: After his lengthy remarks, the room erupted in loud applause. One lieutenant emphasized the pride ANA took in their mission to bring security to Afghanistan, while acknowledging direct U.S. support would be needed for several more years. While those gathered represented a limited

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sample of ANA officers and soldiers, their near universal response to the senior ANA soldier's comments stood out; only one officer, at the outset of the session, argued openly in favor of a large U.S. combat troop increase.

¶11. (C) Other gathered ANA officers and soldiers stressed that Afghans knew how to fight, and many did not understand why the U.S. wanted to spend large amounts of money bringing in more U.S. forces. The funds would be better spent on higher ANA and ANP salaries and expanded recruitment and training. The people trusted the ANA. Afghans would cooperate with them, they argued.

¶12. (C) The ANA brigade's chief artillery officer also noted that due to political paralysis in Kabul, "no new major operations were underway, only simple patrols; we are waiting for new orders." He added that ANA units in Kabul had been placed on high alert for several weeks (and seemed to imply that the potential for civil unrest, not just election-related Taliban attacks, was the main reason).

#### COMMENT

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¶13. (C) This diverse sample of Afghans voiced a common theme (apart from a few exceptions): security in Afghanistan needed to come primarily from more (and better) Afghan forces -- not through additional American troops.

Even Helmand Governor Mangal, a vocal advocate of the improved security the Marine forces have been able to bring to Helmand since their arrival, stepped back from a private endorsement of any large combat troop increase beyond those forces necessary for a clearing operation in Marjah. His counterpart in Farah, Governor Amin, more closely (and more predictably) tracks with what we hear from official-type interactions with government leaders on the question of more troops: the more the better.

¶14. (C) In contrast, the overall sense from many man-on-the-street type interactions more accurately conveys the current public mood in Helmand. This sentiment boils down to a theme of a) don't leave, b) keep partnering, but also c) don't think sending in new U.S. military forces is the best option. Most apparent in these conversations -- whether in a room filled with animated ANA officers and soldiers or conversing with elders in front of mud compounds and rundown bazaar shops -- was an implied question: just how long will the coalition stay in Afghanistan? The size of our ongoing troop commitment seemed to matter less in their minds than U.S.-led coalition stamina, the extent to which our side of the partnership will endure. One Helmand elder remarked that Afghanistan's challenges were not only military or political in nature but generational.

¶15. (U) This cable was drafted by the State Representative to the 2d Marine Expeditionary Brigade, and its Commanding General, Brigadier General Lawrence Nicholson, has reviewed this cable.  
Mussomeli